

THE

TOUGH

BY **JEFF WISE**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **GREGORY MILLER**

TRACK

**HOW—AND WHY—AN AVERAGE GUY BECAME
AN ULTRAMARATHONER**



IT'S A PITCH-BLACK

winter night and Troy Espiritu is in the middle of a forest somewhere in western Georgia. Espiritu, a compact, wiry man with close-cropped hair, jogs along the wilderness trail with a steady, dogged pace, his face a mask of exhaustion. He's been on the run since yesterday morning, nearly 20 hours ago, and he's utterly spent. Shivering uncontrollably from the cold, he notices that the trees on the margins of his headlamp beam seem to be falling on him. *I'm hallucinating*, he realizes. He's already run the equivalent of three consecutive marathons, and he's got a fourth left to go. If he can keep pace, he'll cross the 100-mile mark just as the sun rises.

Ultramarathons like this one are among the most grueling competitions ever devised, defying conventional notions of what the human body can do. But Espiritu is tough: He's completed four 100-mile races. And what's even more remarkable is that just five years ago, he was an ordinary guy who couldn't jog more than two miles at a stretch.



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At age 35, Espiritu, a podiatrist, was raising a family and managing a growing medical practice. "We had a 4-year-old, 2-year-old twins, and a newborn, with no family nearby to help," he says in his genteel Southern accent. The thought of taking on another challenge, not to mention a superhuman one, would seem inadvisable at the least. But as Espiritu was to discover, pushing yourself in one area can have positive ripple effects in other domains.

Espiritu's transformation started with a few words from a friend. At the time, Espiritu was jogging a mile and a half each weekend to keep fit. At church, a member of the congregation mentioned that he'd noticed Espiritu out running. "There's a group of us that meets every Saturday morning," the man told him. "You ought to come out."


With his fellow runners' encouragement, he achieved longer and longer distances. After a few months, he was able to make it to three miles—though, he says, "I was sore for about a week after." What kept him coming back was the group bonhomie. "It's like hanging out in the bar and having a beer," he says. "It's guy time."

Within a few months, some of his running buddies started training for a marathon, and suggested he join them. Espiritu agreed. "I love putting a plan together, and working at that plan, and checking things off on the calendar," he says. "I'm a very goal-oriented person."

Espiritu's wife, Mary Denise, wasn't surprised at the turn her husband's hobby was taking. "I knew that eventually he'd start running marathons," she says. "That's just the way he is. I don't want to say he's obsessive, but when he does something, he does it 120 percent."

As Espiritu notched up marathon after marathon, he learned about races that were longer still—the so-called ultramarathons, which can range from 32 miles to more than 100. At first, such distances seemed absurd, but Espiritu kept thinking about it, and realized that if he could run 26.2, then 32 wouldn't be that much harder. And once he'd done his first 32-miler, 40 didn't seem out of reach.

To prepare his body, Espiritu gradually inured himself to the hardships of extreme distance. He would come home each Friday evening after working all day long, eat dinner with his family, put his kids to bed, and then start running at 10 p.m. He'd return at 6 a.m., shower, coach his kids' soccer game, and keep going all day. "With practice, it definitely got easier to handle," he says. "I can function now on less sleep than I did before."

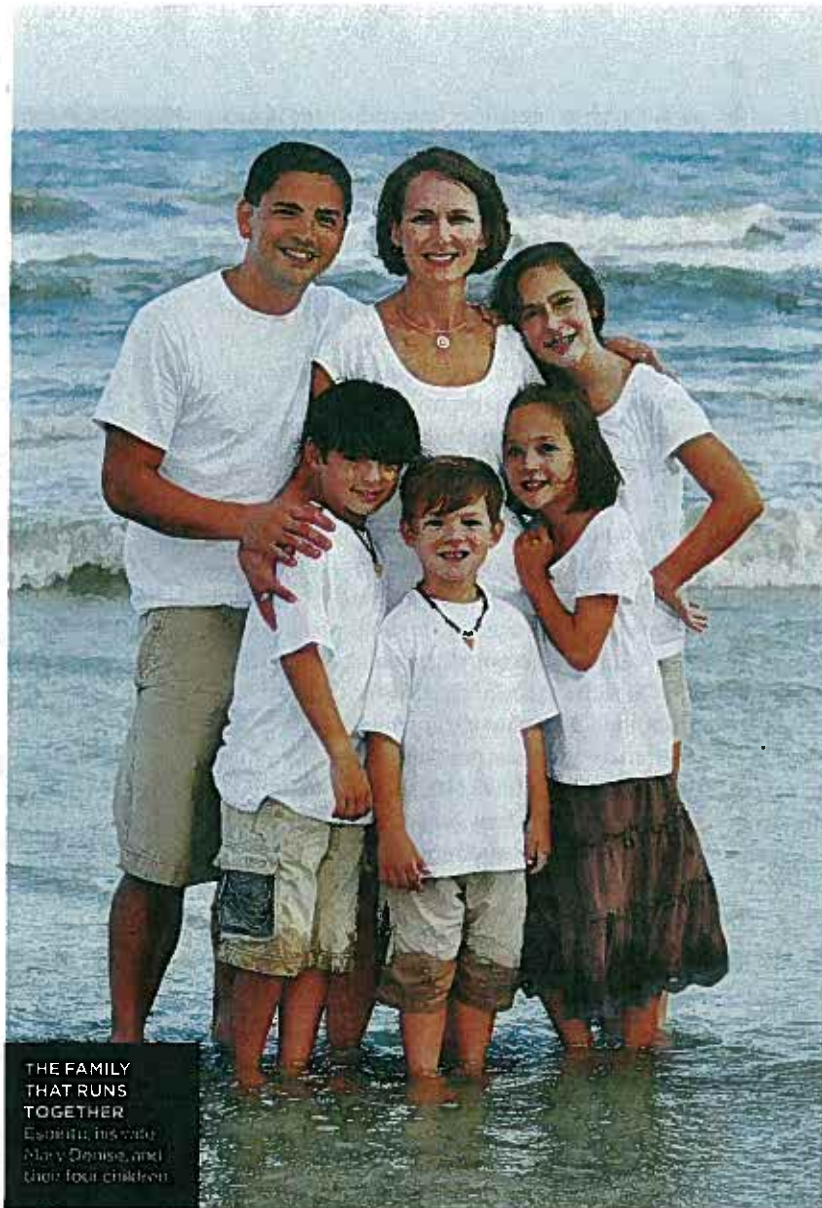


Early on in his all-night runs, Espiritu passes the time with mental games, such as spending 10 minutes thinking about each of his children. But by the later stages, he's so exhausted that he's frequently hallucinating or falling asleep on his feet. "The way I handle it is to break things up into very small, manageable pieces," he says. "The idea of running 100 miles is incomprehensible, even for me, sometimes. My only goal is to get to the next aid station. That's it."

In an ironic twist, Espiritu is a podiatrist engaging in a hobby that nearly guarantees multiple foot ailments. Espiritu has had heel spurs and stress fractures—conditions he says make him a much better and more sympathetic doctor, especially to the running aficionados who now seek him out to get his firsthand expertise.

Espiritu understands that his pastime can be hard for others, including exercise buffs, to fathom. "Patients ask me all the time, 'Why would you do that?' The short response is, 'Because I can.' I've learned I can do it, so why not do it? If you knew that you could run 10 miles, why would you want to run just two?"

His wife teases him by saying, "Your heart is in great shape, but you should get your head checked." She's not the only one to suggest he might be a little bit crazy. "Let's face it, running 100 miles is abnormal. Statistically, probably less than 1 percent of the population can do that," says psychologist Jonathan Abramowitz, who specializes in the treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorders. But, he



THE FAMILY THAT RUNS TOGETHER
Espiritu, his wife Mary Denise, and their four children

TOUGHEN UP

Four keys to handling challenges.

ESPIRITU'S transformation from suburban dad to iron man is extraordinary, but it offers lessons for all of us. While no one really *needs* to be able to run 100 miles in a day, we all require the emotional and mental strength to accept challenges and reach new heights at work and at home.

The modern understanding of toughness has its roots in the research of Salvatore Maddi, a professor of psychology at UC Irvine. In 1975, Maddi began a 12-year project to evaluate the psychological well-being of managers in a telephone company. The study

took an unexpected turn six years later, when the government deregulated the telephone industry. Half of the company's employees were laid off. For two-thirds of this group, the transition was traumatic. Many were unable to cope. They died of heart attacks and of strokes, engaged in violence, got divorced, and suffered from poor mental health. But the other third didn't fall apart. Their lives actually *improved*. Their health got better, their careers soared, and their relationships blossomed. "The general idea at the time was that you should stay away from stress because it can kill you," Maddi recalls. "But it turned out that some people thrive on it."

What made these people different?

Maddi discerned that those who responded well to the crisis shared a characteristic he called "hardiness." In essence, hardy people have the ability to treat each crisis as an opportunity. "Hardiness," says Maddi, "gives you the courage and the motivation to do the hard work of growing and developing rather than denying and avoiding."

Hardiness, he found, can be developed. Although each of us is born with temperamental proclivities, there are steps that we can take to mold what we've got. Like a pip-squeak who exercises himself into hunkdom, we can buff up those parts of our character that will maximize toughness.

And because it fosters resilience, hardiness is a path to general well-

says, Espiritu's behavior is very different from this illness—the struggle to contain or prevent thoughts about an outcome that a patient wants to avoid.

Rather, says Abramowitz, Espiritu is unusual in the degree to which he becomes attached to positive goals. “Some people have an all-or-none personality. They feel that they either have to do something perfectly or it’s 100 percent crap. When that mind-set causes distress, that’s a problem. But if it’s not getting in the way of your life, then I wouldn’t say you have a disorder.”

Beyond his love for long-term planning and execution, it’s likely that Espiritu is driven by the many mood boosters hidden in the training process: “Achievements give us a temporary feeling of elation,” says Sonja Lyubomirsky, a social psychologist at the University of California, Riverside, and author of *The How of Happiness*. “But it’s the pursuit of goals rather than the achievement that creates happiness. When people run long distance, they often get into an engaged state of concentration called flow. They are truly in the present moment, and the

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present is all we have.”

For her part, Mary Denise says that her husband’s extreme regimen has actually been a boon for their home life. “When our children were small, he took up golf for a little while, and that just wasn’t working. He’d leave at 9 A.M. on Sunday morning and come home at 2 P.M.,” she says. “This is healthier for him, and we get to have him around more. He can run all night and still spend the next day with the kids.” Mary Denise has become an avid runner herself—the two sometimes hire a babysitter so they can train together. She even paced her husband for a full 25 miles during one of his ultramarathons—a bonding experience that they will always remember.

John Cobis, a high school teacher and fellow ultramarathoner who has trained with Espiritu, affirms that Espiritu is, in fact, as balanced as he appears to be. “Troy doesn’t miss a beat with his children. He runs a thriving medical practice and his patients love him,” Cobis says.

For all the pain, both mental and physical, that long-distance running has caused him,

being. “If we all lived in bubbles, we wouldn’t need to be tough,” says Chris Peterson, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan. “But we don’t. Everyone takes hits, but the people who can get back up are much happier in life.”

1 ENLIST LOVED ONES

Tending to friends and family doesn’t sound like a particularly tough endeavor. But loved ones are crucial to the cultivation of both inner strength and physical endurance.

Close supporters not only make us feel cared for and appreciated as we move toward our goals, they also provide a font of motivation. When a new project gets overwhelming and we’re ready to scrap it, we think of those who have been our cheerleaders and enablers, and resolve to not let them down. For friends with mutual goals, such as Espiritu and his running pals, a natural desire to remain a part of the group and a sense of obligation to its other members is often much stronger than personal reserves of willpower.

“I don’t think you can look at toughness in a vacuum. It’s almost by defini-

tion a social phenomenon,” says West Point psychologist Michael Matthews. “Many Medal of Honor winners were just normal soldiers who were put in a situation where their love of their buddies overcame any concern about their own well-being.”

“The camaraderie among these guys who run in our community is strong. They’re all extremely disciplined men. But they’re all devoted husbands and fathers, too,” says Espiritu’s friend John Cobis, who is part of a tight group that trains together, goes to church together, and spends time with their wives and kids together. It’s much easier to commit to a path when everyone around you is doing the same.

Friends who push each other to succeed often become closer in the process. Nothing strengthens bonds between people more than shared struggle. “Some of the best friends I have I made through the running community,” says Espiritu. “Given the kind of mileage we do, we’ve gotten to know each other pretty well.” It may even literally ameliorate their aches: Oxytocin, the “bonding hormone,” has been shown to lessen sensations of pain and fear.

2 SEEK OUT CHALLENGES

Most people actively avoid problems and needless work, and think of resilience as something they’ll reluctantly have to tap, should a disastrous event ever hit them. The truly tough don’t want calamity any more than the rest of us, but they tend to light up at the unexpected obstacle—such conflicts and dilemmas are exciting moments for them to conquer, not reasons for crawling back into bed.

The key to mastering this challenge-hungry mind-set is to develop a sense of confidence in your abilities. You can do this, Matthews says, by getting in the habit of pushing your personal envelope. “Set reachable goals that become progressively more challenging,” he says. “Intentionally expose yourself to things that you’re afraid of.” Start telling yourself that the smooth, comfortable life is not something to strive for, but rather a recipe for boredom and stagnation.

Yale psychologist Charles A. Morgan III has been studying Navy personnel who undergo an intense 12-day course that realistically simulates the experience of being captured and interrogated by the enemy. Morgan has found that those who embrace challenge as a

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When the going gets tough and the hot tub beckons, Nowell suggests a visual meditation: Imagine, in as much detail as you can, how you're going to feel when you reach your goal. "Experiencing that state of mind will push you further than any treat will."

신화·전설

MARRIAGE



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MCMANSION



CHILDREN



We have everything the American Dream prescribed.
So why aren't we happy?

by LAUREN SANDLER | photographs by MAURICIO ALEJO/BRANSCH

